DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 304 CG 030 415

AUTHOR Engel, Ned; Parker, Kristin; Caci, Kelly; Currie, Amity; DeCato, Patty; Faustino, Peter J.

TITLE How Psychologists Can Reduce Testing through Solution-Focused Teacher In-Services.

PUB DATE 2000-03-30

NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association of School Psychologists (New Orleans, LA, March 28-April 1, 2000).

PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; Behavior Problems; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Middle School Students; Middle Schools; Problem Solving; Referral; School Psychologists; *Student Behavior; Teacher Workshops; *Teachers

IDENTIFIERS *Solution Focused Counseling

ABSTRACT

A model of in-service teacher training was designed to facilitate staff receptivity, and to help redirect teachers away from a problem view of students' behaviors and towards a solution-focused perspective. The model helps orient teachers to an ecological view of students' problem behaviors. The solution-focused perspective means teachers approach problems by looking at competencies instead of deficiencies. It emphasizes positive change and does not attempt to determine the cause of the behavior. The model serves as a change agent and offers hopeful possibilities. Workshop activities are used to demonstrate the solution-focused approach. A script for role-play is included which can be used to help foster the development of the ecological perspective. The outcome from the use of the model was that the number of referrals for assessment to the school psychologists was reduced at the elementary and middle school levels because teachers had more tools to solve problems on their own. (JDM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 446 304

Abstract

How psychologists can reduce testing through solution-focused teacher in-services.

By Ned Engel and Kristin Parker, Briarcliff Manor Public Schools (New York); Kelly Caci, Pine Bush Public Schools (New York); Amity Currie, Marist College (New York), Patty DeCato, Daytop (New York); Peter J. Faustino, Nanuet Public Schools (New York).

School Psychologists often dream of reducing their testing caseload and doing more consultation. An easy to replicate model of in-service teacher training to facilitate staff receptivity to consultation will be demonstrated. We significantly cut down on the number of referrals for assessments at our elementary and middle schools because the staff had more tools to solve problems on their own. Your colleagues can be oriented to an ecological view which creates change and offers hopeful possibilities.

The goal is to redirect classroom teachers away from a problem focused view by giving them techniques and encouraging them to think about exceptions to problematic situations. A solution-focused perspective emphasizes positive change and doesn't attempt to determine the cause of behavior. We will share ways to motivate a staff to attend and the specific activities and role-plays we used. We will also distribute a student referral form of 12 solution-focused questions. After this workshop teachers may look at dilemmas through a different lens. Teachers can now create their own "consultation groups" with your guidance to practice their newly acquired skills. Old problems don't look the same when your staff is solution focused! We wish to acknowledge the Marist College consultation class of 1999 for their significant contributions.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N ENGEL

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

CG030415

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

How psychologists can reduce testing through solution-focused teacher in-services.
By: Ned Engel, Kristin Parker, Kelly Caci, Amity Currie, Patty DeCato, and Peter Faustino

School Psychologists often dream of reducing their testing caseload and doing more consultation. An easy to replicate model of in-service teacher training to facilitate staff receptivity was developed by graduate students and implemented in several schools. My co-authors are former graduate "School Consultation" students and interns who share a similar vision - redirecting classroom teachers away from a problem view to a solution-focused perspective. We reduced the number of referrals for assessments at our elementary and middle schools because the staff had more tools to solve problems on their own. Your colleagues can be oriented to an ecological view which creates change and offers hopeful possibilities.

What is a solution-focus?

Solution-focused thinking isn't automatic. It happens as you adopt a non-pathological view of human problems. Kral's (1992) list of the basic assumptions of systems/ecological thinking can be shared to enable faculty to make this shift in thinking. A student's behavioral/learning difficulties are triggered by different contexts, including the school environment. Teachers can learn that one powerful way of promoting change in behavior is to formulate a positive explanation of the problem behavior. For example: hyperactive behavior can be reframed as "busy," "involved," or "widely focused;" depression can be seen as the state of being "overwhelmed." Teachers can be encouraged to create a positive focus by asking what am I doing that works with this student. The key for change is being able to see the situational context that influences a student's behavior and reframing one's viewpoint. What we interpret as a child's misbehavior may be their own attempt at problem solving. If we choose to look at a situation from the student's point of view, we create the possibility of cooperation. Each view given its perspective can be true. The element of hope is strengthened when children's difficulties are assessed in terms of the social environment.

How do your colleagues think about school problems? Developing an ecological perspective

If we can change our thinking about a situation, it can effect our whole outlook and feelings. Molnar and Lindquist (1989) regard schools and classrooms as ecosystems: Everyone in the classroom or school in which the problem occurs influences and is influenced by that problem behavior. Social psychologists have hypothesized that it is meaningless to discuss problems of behavior in isolation from the systems or contexts in which those problems arise. It is these very contexts (i.e. classrooms) which define the behavior as disturbing in the first place. Misbehavior may not be a symptom of psychopathology, but a function of one's adapting to a particular system.

A solution-focused perspective means you approach problems by looking at competencies instead of deficiencies. You recognize that many interpretations of a given behavior may be true at the same time. Solution-focused educators realize that student's behavioral/learning difficulties can be triggered by different contexts. The goal is to redirect classroom teachers away from a problem-focused view by encouraging them to think about exceptions to problematic situations. A solution-focused perspective emphasizes positive change and doesn't attempt to determine the cause of the behavior. Teachers' goals switch from determining the cause of the behavior to locating exceptions to problematic situations.

So, when you find yourself with a problem which beginsto feel like an ever tightening knot, it's time to do something different.

Common erroneous assumptions about school problems

Michael Durrant (1995) suggests that instead of viewing school problems as the result of some personal (psychological) or family deficiencies, a school problem often persists because the student and/or teachers and/or parents continue to respond to it in a way that inadvertently helps it continue. Don't be surprised if some of your colleagues actively dispute it. Ours did!

One of the most common erroneous assumptions about school problems is once we understand the reason/cause of the difficulty, we will know how to fix it. Durrant believes as do we that school problems are best viewed in terms of interactional patterns which are inadvertently maintained in the hope of resolving the original difficulty.

Social psychological researcher Fritz Heider has shown our preconceived notions shape how we interpret information and thus encourage us to seek only confirmatory data. It is easy to ignore useful information especially when we are overly confident in our judgments. In explaining the behavior of others, people often make a fundamental attribution error. They explain a person's behavior based on their guesses about inner traits, motives and attitudes while discounting situational constraints.

It is more useful to look at developing a solution to the problem(s), rather than understanding the cause. Teachers who embrace this philosophy realize that a problem isn't solely owned by a referred individual. They start to ask themselves what they would like to change in their relationship with the student being referred. Sometimes modifications of teaching can be helpful. Conventional thinking directs us to look at what's wrong with the kid, making it easier to cast blame. It would be more productive to look at the communication patterns within the school or home. By utilizing a systems perspective, the focus of assessment could be on the context or group as opposed to solely on the individual. A child is only one part of the school ecology.

Motivating colleagues to attend an after-school workshop

The initial step is to motivate a staff to attend the workshop. You may wish to distribute a flyer one week in advance with questions such as: "Is there one student who sometimes brings out the monster in you? You have 25 kids, but all your energy goes to two?" Please come and join your colleagues for "Some New Ideas to Solve Old Problem Behaviors."

Recognizing that you are not alone!

When Dr. Engel and Ms. Parker, his current intern gave the workshop at their elementary school, they started with an ice-breaking activity. Everyone was asked to stand and a series of questions were read aloud. If you agreed you sat down. For example: You have a child who continually disrupts the class. You have a student who just won't pay attention.You have found that traditional methods don't work. You feel like you have tried everything and nothing works..... It would be hard to imagine anyone left standing. Your colleagues will see they are not alone.

The Miracle Question

During the workshop, you can express appreciation for the teachers' hard work in the school year thus far and state that this approach can build upon their already honed skills. Each time we talk with a student, compliment them, or help them to solve a problem, we become co-authors in their lives.

Then introduce some magic. "Has anyone here asked yourself the Miracle Question? If you woke up tomorrow and your classroom and students were the way you only dreamed of, what would it be like?" This can assist teachers in recognizing that there might be times the miracle is already happening. This perspective not only helps to conceptualize school problems, but more importantly school solutions. This activity helped our colleagues create a clear picture of where they wanted to go.

Solution-focused versus problem-focused thinking

The goal is to help teachers change problem behavior without necessarily understanding why it happened. We are seeking exceptions and possibilities rather than looking at the negative and how to "fix it." Our workshops emphasized that the search for a cause to the problem may waste valuable time because there may be little you can actually do about the cause. School problems can be maintained by school personnel and by parents doing more of the same in an attempt to effect change. Stress that if you want something to change, you should work on how you view it and/or do it. Studying a problem too closely can often keep us from finding a solution because solutions are found among the things that are going well.

Role-plays make a point

During the workshop, we demonstrated this solution-focused approach through a role-play. We staged a mini-class simulation, rehearsed in advance with several teachers. (The script is at the end of the article.) The drama involved a 4th grader who had trouble starting her writing assignments. The teacher was getting very frustrated with her student. When she finally got fed up, an angel and a devil took up positions on either side. Instead of viewing the student as unwilling, it was suggested that the problem be looked at more positively. The student could be viewed as being thoughtful and careful-taking the extra time to organize her thoughts before she writes them down. The teacher was given assistance to locate exceptions when her pupil was getting work done. The teacher was asked to act as if a miracle had occurred and pretend her student's "inertia" was no longer a problem. She was also advised to ask the student what she thought.

The Student Referral Form - 12 useful questions

Next, distribute and discuss the Student Referral Form of 12 solution-focused questions: Please describe what behavior causes the most difficulty? When and where does this occur? What instructional activity is taking place when this behavior happens? What would you like to have happen? On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being great and 1 being the worst, where are things now? What have you tried in similar situations in the past with other students? What have you tried that partially works? What have you tried that worked temporarily? What are some strengths and abilities of the student that might be used as a basis for positive change? What is different about the times when things are better? What could we do to encourage this to happen more often? Earlier you said things are now at a __,

how will we know things are a little better, enough for you to be able to say things are at a __? What will that look like? Following this provide a demonstration of specific interventions to bring about change: reframing, locating exceptions, pattern interruption, observational tasks, pretend tasks.

You can also explain Daly & Witt's (1998) Five Reasonable Hypotheses for Academic Deficits: they do not want to do it, they have not spent enough time doing it, they have not had enough help to do it, they have not had to do it that way before, it is too hard. Then, obtain feedback from colleagues and offer opportunities for continued discussion. After this workshop teachers may look at dilemmas through a different lens. Teachers can now create their own "consultation groups" with your guidance to practice their newly acquired skills. Old problems don't look the same when your staff is solution focused! Ultimately the presentation may pave the way for other group consultation efforts.

Feedback at the elementary level

The day after Dr. Engel and Ms. Parker's workshop, the reading teacher told them how she had phoned a parent the previous night and used "pattern interruption," to change the way a parent brings her daughter to school. "It worked" she exclaimed. A 4th grade teacher who earlier in the week had asked for a Conner's rating scale said, "The kid who I thought has ADHD may not - let's wait on the rating scale - your presentation showed me a new way of thinking." Many teachers requested additional faculty presentations. Since the initial workshop, the elementary school staff realized that a student's behavioral difficulties are triggered by different contexts, including the school environment. They began to give different (less pathological) explanations to behavior. Our multi-disciplinary consultation team has started to respond differently to test and place referrals. The goal is to focus on what's going right with students.

At another elementary school, Ms. Caci's staff had these reactions: It made them think they could change what goes on in their classes and they felt encouraged to look at kids in a different way. One teacher stated, "I changed my focus about my difficult students from hoping they would be absent to I can try something different with them today. I hope they will be here!" Other teachers comments were, "This new knowledge empowers me to make small changes. I will look for strengths and concentrate on those instead of weaknesses." "I can be more positive and ask students for their input." The classroom aides asked for more demonstrations of how they could use this on the playground and the teachers wanted a follow-up meeting to share their current dilemmas and compare strategies.

Mrs. Currie, who gave this workshop to a private school's pre-kindergarten to 4th grade faculty, found that the more experienced teachers were the most comfortable implementing the procedures, although everyone found it useful. She varied the workshop by demonstrating a solution-focused consultation about one student so that the teachers could see how this model was different from other approaches. She shared her observations, reviewed the 12 question referral form with the referring teacher and illustrated how they went about implementing an intervention. They started by stating the problem clearly, locating exceptions and setting goals. The staff realized the solution ultimately comes from the consultee and that the problem is the problem. This faculty is looking forward to using this format for other referrals.

Feedback at the middle school level

The focus of Mr. Faustino's middle school presentation was civility and anti-bullying. At a faculty meeting, teachers discussed ways to instill civility in the school. The presentation stressed the importance of finding strength in our students instead of fault. Numerous teachers agreed that if teachers could change the way they communicated with each other and their students, then progress was possible. Handouts from the solution-focused guidebook/program were used to assist teachers in reframing their problems along with looking for exceptions. Specifically the handouts of solution-focused teaching were most helpful. Several days later, a teacher raced to find Peter. She said, "Taking your advice and example, Pete, I spotted a student (who is notoriously ill behaved) being good. The student had politely answered another student's question during group work. I think the student must have been tired and not in the mood to bully others, but I quickly wrote a letter to the student detailing how proud and happy I was to see his actions. After class I handed him the letter. For the next two days he has been on time and extremely cooperative in my class. I checked with the other teachers and they have seen no difference but I know the letter I wrote worked. I changed the way I think of him and he has responded."

Summary:

Often a shift in our own attitudes (beliefs) can make a difference in our relationships. We determine the meaning we give to a situation. Choosing to look at events in a new way can give us added flexibility. Looking for positive viewpoints is the first step to enhancing our relationships. Together, you as the school psychologist, and the teachers in your school can identify and build upon student's strengths. In this way you will see new possibilities and solutions!

References:

Daly III, E., Witt, J., Matens, B., & Dool, E. (1977) A model for conducting a functional analysis of academic performance problems. *School Psychology Review*, 26,4.

Durrant, M. (1995). *Creative Strategies for School Problems: Solutions for Psychologists and Teachers*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Kral, R. (1992). Solution Focused Brief Therapy: Applications in schools. In M. Fine and C. Carlson (Eds), *The Handbook of Family-school Interventions: A systems perspective* (pp) 330-346, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Metcalf, L. (1999). *Teaching Toward Solutions*. New York: The Center For Applied Research in Education.

Molnar,A. & Lindquist, B. (1989). *Changing Problem Behavior in Schools*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Murphy, J. & Duncan, B. (1997). *Brief Intervention for School Problems: Collaborating for Practical Solutions*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Ned Engel, Ph.D., NCSP, is a School Psychologist at Todd Elementary School in Briarcliff Manor, NY, and Kristin Parker, M.A., was an Intern Psychologist at Todd (1999-2000). Kelly Caci, M.A., is a School Psychologist at Putnam Valley Elementary School in NY; Amity Currie, M.A. is a School Psychologist at Dutchess BOCES, NY; Patty DeCato, M.A., is a School Psychologist for the Port Jervis School District in NY; and Peter Faustino, M.A., is the School Psychologist at MacArthur Barr Middle School in Nanuet, NY. The authors wish

to acknowledge the entire Marist College consultation class of 1999 without whose support and participation, this series of workshops would not be nearly as engaging. Dr. Engel can be reached via e-mail at: nengel@todd.lhric.org

Script for Role Play

Narrator: Mrs. Smith is at her wits end. She has tried everything to deal effectively with her new student, Betty. Betty is 9-year-old girl who just moved to the school district and is very shy. She does not have many friends in her class. Betty constantly fidgets and swings her legs while she is supposed to be working on an assignment. Betty's grades have been very good in social studies, math, and science, however, she is failing language arts. Specifically, she has problems with the writing assignments. It takes her a long time to complete her assignments because it takes her so long to get started. When Mrs. Smith assigns writing tasks, Betty usually spends the first few minutes distracted, looking around the room. When the class is ready to move on, Betty is not finished. Mrs. Smith has done everything she can think of to keep Betty on task; she's tried self-monitoring charts, and timers.

Mrs. Smith: Okay class, now that we have read the story Shiloh, it's writing assignment time, I'd like you all to write a story about your family pet. It has to be at least one page with three full paragraphs. Remember to begin with a topic sentence and relate back to it. Remember that there is a beginning, middle and end to a story. You have 20 minutes..let's get started!

Betty fidgets, looks around the room, twirls her hair, and plays with a pen

Mrs. Smith: Betty, put your reading book in your desk and take out your paper and timer. Set the timer for 20 minutes. Don't forget to follow your chart.

Betty gets out her timer, swings her legs, looks around and writes her name

Mrs. Smith: Betty, 5 minutes have passed and you have only written your name. Tell me 5 things about your pet. (Tells her one thing). Okay, write that down and begin your story.

Betty manages to get a sentence written but continues to be distracted

Mrs. Smith: Betty, you only have one sentence written and you have only 5 minutes left to complete your assignment. It looks like you will not be getting any keys for your treasure chest this time.

Betty looks discouraged

Mrs. Smith: Time's up! Betty, you have to stay in for recess later and finish this up. You do so well in math and science. I know you could do this if you wanted to. Put your notebook away; it's time to move on.

Narrator: Mrs. Smith has tried to be patient but is becoming very frustrated. Let's listen to what she is thinking.

Teacher sits down while the angel and devil take up positions on each side

Devil: Betty is always stalling. She has no clue what's going on with the assignment. She can't even write more than one sentence!

Angel: Maybe you are being too hard on her. Perhaps you should look at the problem a little more positively. Betty is just being thoughtful and careful. She is probably taking the extra time to organize her thoughts before she writes them down.

Narrator: (REFRAMING overhead)

Reframing offers a positive way of seeing the situation which may open the possibility for different responses.

Devil: Why should you give her any more extra time to basically sit there and do nothing while the other students are working? Don't change your way of doing things for her!

Angel: You could encourage Betty to take all of the time she needs to complete her writing assignments. Imagine her surprise! By giving her permission to do what she is already doing she doesn't have to struggle with you. She may relax and actually start to work and you can

go on with your lesson.
Narrator: (Use PATTERN INTERRUPTION overhead)
By introducing a small change into the events surrounding a problem you can create a different pattern. These changes may lead to bigger changes and you could see more positive and acceptable behavior.
Devil: She's not putting forth the same amount of effort as she does during her other assignments. She just doesn't care and I don't know why you are wasting your time.
Angel: Remember, Betty is doing very well in her other subjects with you. She has good grades and she is a smart girl. In most cases she finishes her work on time and is very cooperative.
Narrator: (LOCATING EXCEPTIONS overhead)
Locating exceptions involves focusing on instances where the problem does not occur. Sometimes this isn't easy!
Devil: She may be doing well in her other subjects but she stinks at Language Arts. You've done all you can do. What good is she if she can't complete her assignments?
Angel: During those other subjects, you don't have to speak to her as much and you encourage her participation. Maybe you could try that during Language Arts.
Narrator: (Holding up PRACTICING WHAT WORKS poster)
Mrs. Smith can now try out responses that seem to work in other situations. Often simply by responding differently to the problem causes a change in the behavior.
Devil: Look, Betty is such a problem. The other students work hard on their writing assignments. She doesn't belong in your class. Refer her for special education.
Angel: When you were giving the class assignments for other subjects I didn't see you nagging Betty as much to complete her work. You encouraged her participation and reinforced her correct answers. Maybe you could think of Betty as a champion chess player and pretend her "inertia" is no longer a problem. Treat Betty "as if" what she is doing is okay. Her behavior may change if you change yours. I'm not telling you to ignore Betty's procrastination - just give it a different meaning.
Narrator: (Use PRETEND TASKS poster)
Acting as if a miracle has occurred assists a teacher in changing her perception of the problem at hand and as a result, the problem may not seem like a problem at all. The student may chose to respond differently as well.
Devil: Look, you've tried everything! You even gave her a timer to try to keep her on task. Nothing works...she's just lazy. You should give up on her and concentrate on the other students who actually want to learn.
Angel: It's too soon to give up! If none of these things work, you can still keep trying. You could always ask Betty what she thinks. It may be helpful to consider her perception of the problem because she probably can come up with her own solution.
Narrator: (Use DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT overhead)
Children are often the last to be asked. Even when you feel like throwing in the towel, it is important to continue to try new things when facing difficult dilemmas in the classroom.